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# CAN SCHOOLS TEACH DEMOCRACY?

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## *Abstract*

*There is widespread assumption that the school is capable of successfully bringing about any form of learning. As a result, current clamouring for transition to democratic form of government, especially in developing countries have led to additional responsibility and expectations from the school system. The slow pace of progress and outright failure of democratization efforts in these countries have in turn led to the accusation of irrelevance on the schools.*

*This paper examines the logic of the assumptions inherent in this debate, the limits and possibilities of schooling as well as the interface of education and democracy. The paper concludes by submitting that if education is to serve as a program of action, certain pre-requisites must of necessity be present, and that even then, success is not automatic.*

## Can Schools Teach Democracy?

The question: Can Schools Teach Democracy? looks rather simple at first. And, the immediate answer might be, why not, of course, they should; if schools can teach Mathematics, Languages, Swimming, Wood Work and so on, why not Democracy?

Even without raising the necessary objection against the assumption that Democracy can be equated with other skills that schools have been noted to succeed at imparting, it would be necessary to attempt to clarify the meaning of this thing whose teaching is at issue here.

Before this, however, one would like to observe that much of the literature of democracy and democratic transition especially in Africa, which have witnessed significant attention of late has concentrated on issues of conceptual clarification and historical analysis, among others, without much concern for the realization of whatever ideal is involved especially from within the school system.

While one cannot blame political scientists for this seeming neglect, it is the view of this writer that educationists should assume greater responsibility by working hand in hand with their counterparts in political science in order to realise this mutual goal. It is in this context that this paper is prepared. It is the Chinese who have said that, "Whatever a nation desires, good or evil, it should throw it into its schools."

Meanwhile, the search must begin with conceptual clarification.

### **What is Democracy?**

Democracy, we have learnt, has its roots in the Greek City States. Etymologically, it is made up of two Greek words - Demos - people - and Kratos - rule.

It is therefore interpreted as the rule of the people. It was a situation whereby the entire population of free-born citizens of about 10,000 BC participated directly in the governmental decisions of the city state. The definition was beautifully rendered by a famous American President, Abraham Lincoln, as "government of the people, by the people and for the people."

If the definition of Democracy is as easy and straight forward as this, one might then wonder why the concept has generated the greatest controversy and struggle over the centuries.

Claude Ake (1992) offers an insight. He argues that:

the problem is not, and never has been determining what democracy means but the contradictions of people's responses to its perceived implication for their power and their interests.

In spite of this seeming simplicity of the meaning of democracy, one should exercise some caution so as not to end up frustrated by the so-called simplicity of the meaning of democracy.

Firstly, definitions from etymology have their clear limitations as words acquire new dimensions and attributes in the same way languages develop.

Secondly, the profusion of literature on democracy does not support simplicity in meaning.

As one is not in a position to offer the definition of democracy, it might suffice to point out that the gap of about 2,000 years between the Greek theory and practice of democracy and modern constitutionalism places apparent limitations to our wholesale adoption of the Greek definition.

It is also in this light that one can identify different conceptions of democracy. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Vol. 3, pp. 458 and 459) identifies four types which are: Direct Democracy; Representative Democracy; Liberal or Constitutional Democracy, and Social or Economic Democracy.

Of all these, direct democracy is the one closest to the Greek practice, while representative democracy is a form of government in which citizens exercise the same right through representatives chosen by, and responsible to, them. The egalitarian and popular power contexts of democracy especially as contained in the French enactment of its revolution had however become domesticated by the West through its emphasis on liberal and constitutional democracy. The emphasis here is often on "consent of the governed, multi-party pluralism, electoral competition, and guarantee of rights including equality before the law" Ake, (92:2).

He further observed however that, "the celebrated rights of liberal democracy are largely abstract rights, poor people have no chance at all of realising most of them." Social or economic democracy on the other hand refers to a political or social system that tend to reduce social and economic differences especially those arising out of the unequal distribution of private property.

While noting the above variations, it is still possible to identify certain features of democracy. Otubanjo (1992) identifies liberty and equality as the critical elements. According to him, democracy assumes the participation of the general populace, equality of all men in the processes of government, and the freedom of choice that the individual in the society chooses government in an atmosphere unpolluted by coercion, fear, and other disabilities.

We have made sufficient incursion into the domain of political scientists in order to bring out the fact that the meaning and context of democracy is not as clear or simple as it is assumed. This observation raises specific problems for the institution of education. Democracy however readily evokes positive feelings even without generally accepted definitions. For example, after arguing that,

the essence of democracy involves a system of government that is rooted in the notion that ultimate authority in governance of the people rightfully belong to the people that everyone is entitled to an equitable participation and share in the fortunes and misfortunes of the land of his birth or citizenship, and that equal rights and equitable social and economic justice is the birthright of everyone in society

The communique that came out of *Understanding Democracy* declared that:

this notion of democracy is so logical, so natural that the need for it as a fundamental course in the running of the affairs of the state appears simply incontrovertible. The consistent return to one form of elective government or the

other in the short history of many countries of independent Africa, should convince, even the most dogmatic that democracy is not only a natural, innate, human tendency, but an inevitable course of action and the basic right of every human being.

However, while the current clamour for democracy in Africa gives cause for joy, one should realise that the version of democracy being supported especially by the West is liberal democracy which writers such as Ake have told us to be the diluted form of democracy whereby popular power is actually de-emphasised. Ake, (92:4).

The controversy on definition of democracy notwithstanding, there is need to clarify the concept of teaching in so much as it is expected to serve as the medium through which democracy is to be realised.

### **What is it to Teach?**

Teaching is a sub-set of the concept of education. To teach, according to Peters' (73:150)

is to bring someone to learn something by indicating in some way what has to be learnt in a manner that is adapted to his level of understanding.

The above definition however assumes the simplicity of learning. It assumes the irrelevance of a fundamental epistemological argument which Plato raised in *Meno* when he stated that learning is impossible. According to him, it is either you know what you are looking for, and so do not need to learn, or you do not know what you are looking for and so cannot recognise it if you come across it.

This argument challenges the possibility of learning democracy in schools. It also challenges the whole basis of the establishment and existence of schools.

Taking this epistemological argument further, Polanyi as reported by Allen (1978) submitted that Plato's argument in *Meno* shows conclusively that if all knowledge is explicit, that is, capable of being clearly stated, then we cannot know a problem or look for its solution. He argued further that the answer must be in tacit knowing.

We also pursued this argument in another paper on the teaching of values in schools by submitting that:

The best schools can obviously hope to achieve when it comes to teaching values is to teach critical thinking which would in turn facilitate informed and adequate choice by learners (Babarinde, 1990)

The above submission was made due to awareness of differences in categories of knowledge. One might talk, for example, of knowing *how* to ride a bicycle or *how* to prepare oxygen in a science laboratory or furthermore about *how* to convert cast iron into a stainless steel.

The above category differs markedly from claiming to know *that* honesty is the best policy or that 75% of the earth surface is covered with water or *that* democracy is the best form of government.

While the first category can be easily verified through demonstration since they are technical knowledge of sort, the second category may not be that easy, as they are knowledge derived from book learning. Here, there are more grounds for disagreement. Take for instance, the task of defining what constitutes democracy and the skill of riding a bicycle are not identical. And if the logical boundary of a concept is not clear, the task of inculcating it becomes all the more complex.

The above argument notwithstanding, it is still possible to operationalise the concept of teaching. To Frankena (1973), the process, activity or enterprise of being educated involves, "cultivating, fostering or acquiring what I call dispositions and Peters calls "states of mind" (beliefs, knowledge, skills, habits, traits, values etc)."

He further presents a graphic representation. According to him, the process of educating, that is, teaching occurs whenever X is fostering or seeking to foster in Y some disposition (D) by method M.

X = those doing the educating whoever they are;

Y = those being educated

D = dispositions that are desirable Y should acquire

M = the methods that are satisfactory.

Giving the above definition of "teaching," one might wish to conclude that the task before political scientists is to offer us a satisfactory and detailed conceptual clarification of democracy after which educationists would design appropriate strategies for delivery through the schools, but it is not as straight forward as that.

Appeal to the accuracy of a definition, even when it is fully warranted, cannot itself support any controversial programme that may be involved. And definition of social terms in particular do not in isolation yield practical consequences at all. They require contextual supplementation by principles of action. This leads us to our next concern which is,

## **The Limits and Possibilities of Schooling**

Despite the huge investment in formal Western education in our schools in the hope that through it, significant development would be achieved, apprehensions are being shown on the capacity of our schools to deliver the goods. Johnson (1982), for example, writes that:

Schools today are facing a crisis. Under attack is not only the job the public schools are doing, but the very idea that they can do the job. Johnson (1982).

In developing countries especially Africa, charges of irrelevance have been laid against schooling which is the inherited formal Western system of education.



African leaders and writers such as Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Kofi Busia, Abdou Moumouni, and Majasan, among many others, have written extensively on this topic. Their charges of irrelevance against formal Western education are summed up by Thompson (1981:33). According to him:

their curricula are said to be bookish, oriented towards higher levels of education which are beyond the reach of the majority of their pupils, divorced from the life and culture of the local people and, consequently, unsuited for preparing the child for life in his own community. The method of teaching in use are said to be examination centred, authoritarian, restrictive of the growing child, failing to produce original thinking or problem solving ability on the one hand and genuine commitment to the service of the community on the other. The selection and allocation functions performed by the schools, it is argued, have encouraged a selfish elitism of African society and at variance with the egalitarian principles which are being espoused by the new national societies. Education in the current mould encourages a "white collar mentality" and a contempt for manual labour, is responsible for a profound cleavage between educated elites and the masses, has encouraged a drift of young people to towns, the loosening of moral standards and the decay of moral that is valued in traditional society.

Also, in a publication jointly sponsored by UNESCO and UNDP, Hallack (1990) traced the history of world educational crisis from the sixties up to date. Apart from the general problems facing education worldwide, the situation in the developing countries from the late seventies and early eighties was that of economic recession which led to balance of payments and budget deficits which in turn severely affected the capacities of governments to finance education. We can add to the above, African debt crisis and IMF - World Bank sponsored Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which often recommend reduction of government expenditure on social services of which education constitutes a major one.

Apart from the negative context within which African education operates, one can also identify several discontents in African education. For example, in Nigeria the introduction of the highly controversial quota system into the admission policy of Federally-owned institutions, the almost total neglect of public primary and secondary education leading to teacher's frequent agitations and strikes as well as government's huge support of elitist schools are cases in point. We also have poor funding, erosion of academic freedom, loss of institutional autonomy, and degrading teachers' conditions of service in the institutions of higher learning. Authoritarianism in school administration, over-politicization of education and unnecessary governmental interference have added to the charges of circumstantial irrelevance against our schools.

Giving the current credibility question surrounding schools in most African countries, what is the hope of achieving democracy through them? What, of course, is the rationale for this expectation?

## **The Interface of Education and Democracy**

The feasibility of teaching democracy by our school will, no doubt, be affected by the relationship between education and democracy.

Although we have raised the specific problem of teaching, our argument is affected by the realization that teaching is a sub-set of education and that schools are generally established for the purpose of educating the people.

To start with, both education and democracy are generally as desirable. The pursuit of education as well as democracy evoke positive response and argument abound that tend to justify both concepts on utilitarian grounds on one hand, and as constituting desirable ends worth pursuing for their own sake on the other. For example, it is argued that education denotes intrinsically worthwhile activities. It is a process of being initiated into knowledge and understanding which in turn regulate the recipient's attitudes, emotions, wants, and actions. That the recipient has to be more than just "knowledgeable," the knowledge has to alter his view of the world,

that is, the interpersonal world, the world of social, economic and political institutions. While this knowledge and understanding have to be worthwhile, the processes of acquisition must also be ethically defensible. And these processes include all organizational modes in which these processes are promoted. They include the formal, non-formal, informal and casual modes (Babarinde, 91:209). Similar views are provided by philosophers of education like Peters, Frankena, Akinpelu, and Soltis, among others. However, in this paper, our focus is on the school system. We can therefore see that education incorporates the propositions that it should aim at the good of the recipients as well as at the good of others and that the recipients should emerge as distinct individuals with significant ownership of choice over their thought and actions, inclinations and aspirations and not reduced to mere categories. These qualities also happen to coincide with some of the goals of democracy and democratization.

Again, education is of public concern which is practical by nature. Therefore, implications are often drawn from its pursuit. The argument that is one values education, one will observe certain democratic qualities such as identified by Greenberg (1962) is a popular one. These qualities are: individualism, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

A strong link exists between democracy and education that the philosopher and educationist of Dewey's status argued that both concepts are two sides of the same coin and that education really connotes the practice of democracy (Dewey, 1961). The denial of the desirability of education and therefore democracy is to deny so fundamental an aspect of human nature that it just seems perverse.

The general and persistent demand for democracy and democratization especially in developing countries suggest a presupposition in favour of the development of democratic principles. And now that we have argued in favour of the existence of a strong link between democracy and education, it becomes imperative to examine the implications for educational delivery.

## **Democracy through our Schools**

Schools are engaged in the process of education, although schooling does not automatically confer educatedness. Teaching is directed towards the achievement of learning which again is a sub-set of education. While some see teaching as a parasitic concept, that is, wholly dependent on learning, another more balanced view regards it as symbiotic; that is, both teaching and learning as dependent on one another. The goal, however, is education.

While the impossibility of teaching/learning has been handled on the theoretical level, it is noteworthy to point out that such views had been offered even in relation to the feasibility of democracy. In reality, however, one can assert the achievement of our schools in certain areas of knowledge impartation such as mathematics, woodwork, swimming, reading etc. To teach, in fact, suggests achievement of a task. Though schools have been noted to achieve significant success at imparting some tasks, it does not follow that schools can teach the practice of democracy as distinct from theories of democracy. This is because the practice of democracy relate to a conglomeration of beliefs, attitudes, and values which may not lend themselves to easy evaluation. They may, in fact, constitute what happens to a recipient several years after leaving the school. A school motto "*Non Scholae Sed Vitae*" meaning Not for school but for life, beautifully captures this argument.

To train leaders of men is one of the most difficult jobs in teaching. Socrates had thought a great deal about this, but had failed miserably in doing it. Plato also tried it with Dionysus of Syracuse, whom he tried to make into a philosopher - king, and who became a tyrant. Even if Aristotle had believed that the democratic type of man was the best, he could not teach Alexander to practice the democratic virtues. Instead, he taught him something of the virtue most important in a Monarch - generosity, which Aristotle himself called greatness of soul Highet (1951:166).

The implication of the above argument is that if we expect success from the school in their attempts at teaching democracy, limited and specific tasks should be set for them.

Such tasks may include the inculcation of virtues of popular power, equality, accountability, freedom, and justice, among others.

We must also concern ourselves with issues such as what to teach, who to teach, who is to be taught, how to teach and under what conditions. We shall now examine each of these in turn.

### **What to Teach**

There is need to carry out certain reforms in the school curricula. In doing this, we must ensure learner-input and deliberate attempts should be made to integrate items meant to inculcate democratic virtues. Existing school subjects should be used to teach these virtues where possible thereby minimising the burden of ever-increasing school subjects. Other avenues such as guest lectures, symposia, film shows, drama, and debates that focus on democratic movements around the world can also be employed.

A democratised evaluation strategy like the Continuous Assessment procedure will equally serve a useful purpose.

### **Who to Teach**

Teaching is a very important job. It needs special training hence professionalization should be improved to ensure the right calibre of people with genuine interest and intellectual capability. Their training should be improved and facilities for continuous training while on the job should be provided in order to expose them to latest development in the pedagogic field. Their training should discourage authoritarian concept of teaching in favour of a democratic outlook whereby the teacher accepts his students as partners engaged in a cooperative effort to achieve

learning. On the whole, teachers should be encouraged through improved remuneration and conditions of service.

## **Who is to be Taught**

Learners should be recognised as significant within the school system. Therefore, relevant information on their physical, psychological and social make-up should be obtained and used judiciously. The use of Guidance Counselling Services, Parent-Teachers Association Forum and other follow-up efforts should be intensified to encourage their greater participation in the teaching-learning process.

## **How to Teach**

Techniques of teaching that embrace democratic ideals should be adopted. Methods like discussion, group, project, drama, among others, should be preferred to others where the teacher is regarded as the sole agent of learning. Facilitators of learning in form of instructional technologies should also be used.

## **Under what Conditions**

All the agencies involved in school administration should begin to adopt more open techniques. Such agencies include education ministries, school administrators, teachers, examination bodies etc. Democratic ideals are contagious and their adoption in school administration is likely to encourage their spread.

On a more specific level, we should begin to inculcate democratic virtues into school children by democratizing the processes of selecting classroom and school leaders through popular choice. This practice is not strange to the education system. The adoption of Sociometry introduced by Moreno (1934) places particular emphasis on popular choice in the selection of classroom and school group leaders.

General enabling environment should also be created for our schools such as increased funding, proper education policies, movement away from over-politicization and many others.

Perhaps, if we start at a modest level like this, our schools might rise beyond the present level of irrelevance and begin to assume greater responsibility for a better social, economic and political society. It is surely going to be a great task!

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